

INTRODUCTION: THEORY AND METHOD

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The Theory and Method Thread of *Lateral* launches its first publication with two essays, one by John Mowitt of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature at University of Minnesota and one by Jared Sexton, Director of African American Studies, School of Humanities at University of California Irvine. Together their essays along with responses by Christina Sharpe of American Studies at Tufts University, Adam Sitze of Black Studies and Law, Jurisprudence and Social Thought at Amherst College and Morgan Adamson of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature at University of Minnesota, all take theory to one of the most pressing, worldly and yet intimate, of issues faced by each of us, whether working in and/or outside the academy: that is, the conditions of study, or studies, in the University.

Mowitt's essay, "The Humanities and the University in Ruin" puts the issue before us in terms of work or, as Mowitt puts it, 're: working' the work of study, scholarship and research under the contemporary conditions of 'biopolitical control' or neoliberal structural adjustment of the academy. These conditions now well known have put us beyond the troubles of discipline or disciplinarity to something more abstract and technical, if not technological, a matter which Adam Sitze addresses, emphasizing Mowitt's critical account of the technological transformation of the academy which nonetheless refuses melancholia; thus Mowitt takes another path through the ruin. Mowitt's other path, a daring proposal to re: work work, revisits Freud's pleasure principle but more importantly Marx's labor theory of value and its more recent elaborations within the Italian workerist tradition. Mowitt warns against reducing the issue of study to complaints of poor pay and poor working conditions and therefore holds the issue of the labor of study on a fine line between the refusal of the work of study altogether and the insistence on simply enjoying the study that we are required to do or paid to do. Working conditions and remuneration for work, not to mention layoffs, hiring freezes and slashing of benefits, certainly are pressing concerns as Morgan Adamson sharply reminds us in his response to Mowitt. Offering a quick survey of some of the horrid details of the work expected of research assistants in science labs, Adamson also softens the distinction implied in Mowitt's focus on the humanities as against the sciences. But Mowitt is not denying the poor conditions under which so many of us work for insufficient pay in and outside the University; he rather is warning us about moving too quickly off the fine line between refusal and enjoyment of the required or paid work of study. He is arguing instead for the value of study as a labor of the negative. Mowitt then takes some elegant last moves to turn this return to the labor of the negative into the work of affirmation, thought affirming itself; he thereby moves beyond the dialectic and the Euro-centric Hegelian tradition of progress to affirm instead the immanent unfolding of mindfulness or thoughtfulness, an unfolding of an affective labor that bears within it the in-excess of measure, the yet-incalculable excess of the current calculability of value. This makes the re: working of study not merely a matter of the human or the humanities but of the technical/human medium we fast are becoming, and which we are coming to know we always have been, as has the University.

If it would seem fortuitous to have Jared Sexton's essay along side Mowitt's, it also is a necessity, given that the tension between horrible conditions of study and the desire for the in-excess of the calculable value of study or living mindfully or thoughtfully, can hardly be

addressed without addressing the fates of those institutes of study, the studies, that bear the names of **those who have been and are marginalized in the University**: Women, Blacks, Ethnics, Queers, for exemplary examples. To ask what of these in the neoliberal, structurally adjusted academy is, as Sexton sees it, to ask again about the tension between what has been coined **afro-pessimism and black-optimism** or what black intellectuals long have discussed as life after or in the social death of slavery. Taking up the arguments of a number of these intellectuals, especially those most recently offered by Fred Moten, Saidiya Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, Sexton joins Mowitt in proposing that we stay on the fine line, **here between optimism and pessimism**, between life and death, which if seen to be merely a matter of an opposition can too easily be resolved without allowing for the labor of the negative or the time of the immanent unfolding of mindfulness or thoughtfulness in a yet-incalculable excess of the current calculability of value. Over time, or in the rhythm of a return, we are turned again and again to the intimacy of life and death, hopefully without an over-identification with the latter. For the optimists, the refusal of this identification is an insistence on "black agency being logically and ontologically prior" to a social order that is anti-black, prior to a governance that turns blackness criminal and therefore calls for an affirmative politics of fugitivity. On the side of pessimism, is the longue duree of social death in the ongoing history of slavery and anti-black racism, if not racism generally. **It is blackness theorized as** "a structural position," "a conceptual framework" and "a structure of feeling." On the fine line between this pessimism and this optimism, Sexton argues that a question arises as to how to approach this social life in social death while enabling new means of thoughtfulness or mindfulness in living, in studying, in the University and elsewhere. In resonance with Mowitt, Sexton borrowing from David Marriott argues for "the need to affirm affirmation through negation...not as a moral imperative...but as a psychopolitical necessity." **Here negation becomes affirmation**, as Sexton argues further that rather than theorizing an either/or, why not a both/and. And if in her response to Sexton, Christina Sharpe would agree, she also would return us to the psychopolitical necessity of such theorizing by pointing to her students who have organized again and again for black studies, and who in doing so each time also ask whether black studies "can ameliorate the quotidian experience of terror in black lives lived in an anti-black world?" And if not, **what should the relationship be** between life and black studies, or between life and the University.

To theorize in and about the University at this time, it would seem that it is best not to get too far from this question. Theory is better put to the task of seeking the time of unfolding between the fact of blackness and living black social life, the unfolding of mindfulness, thoughtfulness in the bodies of subjects as an emergent agency that modulates structures of feeling, conceptual frameworks and structural positionalities enough for these to give new resources for our optimism.

The essays and the responses that follow are passionate and rich in intellectual explorations of one of the most important issues before us.